Co-creating asylum reception in a living lab: learning from the experiences of refugees and locals

Rianne Dekker, Karin Geuijen and Caroline Oliver

Acknowledgements

Introduction

After arriving in the Netherlands, asylum seekers spend their first months, up to years, in asylum seeker centres (ASCs). These centres provide housing during the period when their asylum request is being assessed and before asylum seekers who are granted a residence permit can move into regular housing. The Dutch government principle—similar to that of other European governments—is that asylum receptions should be "basic but humane" (ACVZ, 2013). During their stay in the ASC, asylum seekers are forbidden to work for more than 24 weeks a year and are not allowed to attend Dutch language classes (Martin et al., 2016; Odé & Dagevos, 2017; Van den Enden et al., 2018). Contact with the local community is limited by security measures that restrict visits to asylum centres. ASCs are "closed" facilities, on the margins or away from receiving societies (Geuijen, 1998; 2003; Ghorashi, 2005; Kreichauf, 2018).

These measures prevent the economic and social integration of asylum seekers into Dutch society, providing another example of how such "deliberate and distancing measures" are common across European asylum regimes (O'Reilly, 2019, p. 191). Getting a regular job and learning the Dutch language are only allowed for asylum seekers who have received a residence permit after they have moved into regular housing. The Dutch government also aims to prevent a public image of luxurious ASCs. There is no political and public support for more public spending on asylum reception and the government believes that when word of comfortable reception centres reaches aspiring migrants, this could attract more asylum seekers (Schans & Optekamp, 2016).

Over recent years, the Dutch policy for asylum reception has become a subject of debate, with discussion on the problems it generates for Dutch society as well as for asylum seekers: high levels of unemployment, poor well-being among asylum seekers and low levels of inclusion of refugees in Dutch society. Research shows that refugees, once granted a residence permit, have lower participation rates in the labour market than native Dutch citizens. They also participate less than other migrant groups; even nine and 15 years after being granted residence permit, refugees have lower rates of participation compared to economic and family migrants, demonstrating what is known as the "refugee gap" (Connor, 2010; Bakker et al., 2017; Van den Enden et al. 2018). The period of seeking asylum and waiting in a reception centre during the legal application for asylum is considered "lost time", which prohibits labour market integration (ACVZ, 2013; 2017; Engbersen et al., 2015).

Furthermore, restrictions in ASCs constrain asylum seekers' well-being. The social isolation and boredom experienced in asylum centres worsen the anxiety experienced as a consequence of the legal insecurity associated with the asylum procedure. Opportunities for self-determination and agency are diminished within the context of an asylum centre. The literature generally shows how the contexts in which asylum seekers live create a passive attitude (Geuijen, 2003; Ghorashi, 2005; Darling, 2009; Kreichauf, 2018).

Yet, developing alternative forms of asylum reception has proven difficult and has been politically contested. Besides political arguments against early integration and the better well-being of asylum seekers, policies have failed to provide satisfactory solutions to issues relating to the high levels of unemployment among refugees and asylum seekers' poor well-being. However, recently, some cities and their non-governmental partners within the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe, have begun experimenting with alternatives to counter these problems

in a more innovative way. In this chapter, we discuss one of these experiments, which used co-creative methods. This is called a "living lab". We discuss this method below in detail.

The experiment is the Utrecht Refugee Launchpad project (U-RLP, also known as "Plan Einstein"), which sought to develop an innovative approach to asylum-seeker reception in the district of Overvecht in Utrecht from November 2016 until October 2018. A group of up to 400 asylum seekers were co-housed in an ASC with 38 young adults from Utrecht. Courses in business English and entrepreneurship were taught; these were available for free for both asylum seekers and locals. The project received funding from the European Commission's Urban Innovative Actions programme to design and trial new solutions to improve asylum seekers' prospects, well-being and social relations with locals. The project was managed by a partnership consisting of the city of Utrecht, a housing company, NGOs and education institutes. Through living and learning in close proximity to each other, asylum seekers and locals were expected to build relationships, gain skills and ultimately benefit from better prospects and greater well-being, with the programme acting as a launchpad to further success. Asylum seekers and locals were encouraged to co-create social activities and co-design common spaces in the ASC.

This chapter considers how the co-creative method of the living lab can empower different groups of participants in the specific domain of asylum reception. Below, we first discuss this living lab methodology, the co-creative methods that it used and how it was implemented in the U-RLP. Then, we discuss two key examples of solutions to the problems of integration and well-being in asylum reception, which were developed within the U-RLP: co-teaching courses and re-designing the central living space. We outline how these solutions were developed by and benefitted various participant groups in the living lab. Here, we distinguish between locals, refugees with a Dutch residence permit and asylum seekers who are still in the process of obtaining a permit. In the final section, we discuss the implications of the living lab for the empowerment of these different participant groups by reflecting on the more general question of under what conditions co-creative methodologies are suited to the context of asylum reception, especially where very different levels of agency between participants exist.

The living lab methodology

The chapter is written from our perspective as evaluators in the project, from which we suggested the living lab as a methodology to evaluate the solutions to problems of asylum reception, which were being developed within the U-RLP, while at the same time not stifling the innovative spirit of trialling new solutions. The living lab refers to a methodology of experimentation and innovation, as well as the physical spaces in which this is situated. The methodology helps tackle problems at hand by *designing* and *testing* new solutions with intended beneficiaries. "Living labs" or "living laboratories" were originally developed for technological innovation in the 1990s and since the 2000s, living labs have been an emerging practice in the social sciences, focusing on social and public innovation (Dekker et al., 2019).

As in other co-creative methods for innovation, the policy target groups are not mere subjects or recipients but are actively engaged in developing new policy solutions. As Carstensen and Bason (2012) have stated about co-creative design methodologies in general, the living lab is about "crafting new solutions with people, not just for them" (p. 6). Co-creation delivers a better understanding of which elements of a public intervention are valuable to the target groups, which are not valuable to them (and can be terminated or avoided) and which create synergy with other (public) interventions in order to deliver smarter, "holistic" interventions at the system level (Bason, 2010, p. 152). More fundamentally, the involvement of clients and citizens reflects a paradigm shift from a public sector tradition of policy design and delivery by professional experts to a more horizontal practice of co-creation and co-production (Hartley, 2005).

It is claimed that the co-creative approach brings advantages to the participants in the living lab. When subjects become agents in the process of innovation, they innovate more (and more radically) than companies or governments would do in a top-down, managed process of innovation (Bason, 2010, PP. 166–167, quoting Lettl et al., 2008). Earlier living lab studies have found that participation in a living lab will (creatively) empower individual participants or the community as a whole (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Ståhlbröst, 2009; Hooli et al., 2016). Solutions that are created by subjects are also more legitimate because they have the support of the intended target groups.

There are also aspects of living labs that challenge this promise of empowerment. In practice, participants often do not have a say in the scope of the living lab. They become included in a project only after the basic settings have been designed

by a managing partnership. Another threat to the empowerment and agency of participants is that the innovation that they co-create is sometimes taken away after the innovation process ends. Living labs usually have a medium- to long-term time span, but it is not guaranteed that the solutions that are developed will remain available to the participants for a longer period of time (Følstad, 2008).

The living lab is not only a methodology that fosters experimentation but also a physical space in which this innovation is situated. Originally, this methodology was used to research and improve consumer technology based on feedback from users' real-life experiences and has been used to inform technological innovation since the 1990s. More recently, the living lab methodology has also been applied in social innovation (cf. Voorberg et al., 2015). Here, the innovation that is being developed is of a social rather than a technological nature. It can, for example, be used to (re)design a service, policy or public space. Well-known examples are urban living labs; here, cities are considered real-life laboratories where new solutions to urban problems are designed and trialled with citizens. Core to the living lab methodology is co-creation with those who will ultimately be using the solution. Their input and experience with the service, policy or space that is being designed are decisive in whether a designed prototype will be adopted.

Applications of living labs in social science research have grown over the past years (Dekker et al., 2019). A large variety of research practices has been gathered under this label. Some put emphasis on the *living* process of design and re-design, while others focus on the situated and uncontrolled *lab* environment in which this process is situated. As a result, the methodology has suffered from a lack of conceptual and methodological clarity (cf. Bergvall-Kåreborn and Ståhlbröst, 2009).

When reviewing recent applications of the living lab in the social sciences, four key characteristics of a living lab emerge (Dekker et al., 2019). First, living labs use an iterative process of gradually improving and refining a product or service in successive stages of research and design. Studies generally distinguish three to six phases in the research and design cycle (Almirall & Wareham, 2011). Usually, the initial phase entails an inventory of users' needs and wishes, the middle phase(s) deals with the design of a prototype and the last phase comprises the evaluation of the product or service. Key to living labs is that the process can take spontaneous turns and yield unexpected results. The end result of the process is not fixed at the beginning. In successive iterations, the design improves and becomes more concrete.

A second core element of a living lab is that it is a cooperation between multiple stakeholders—varying from universities to businesses, government organisations and NGOs. These stakeholders each have an interest in the product or service that is being developed and deliver input from various perspectives. As a result, living labs are often public-private partnerships and are usually co-funded by the participating stakeholders. A research institute is part of a living lab consortium to facilitate the evaluation of intermediate solutions and stimulate learning to feed into re-design. As part of the consortium, researchers are not external evaluators but are closely involved in the living lab and committed to the innovation process.

A third core element of living labs is the locus of the research and design process. This is the physical setting in which the policy or service is envisioned to be implemented. These can be people's homes, organisations, cities ("urban living labs") or regions. Innovations are designed to fit specific local demands and conditions, and do not necessarily fit other contexts equally well. Living labs do not aim to control the environments in which the solutions are tested but use real-life circumstances to create a better design and ways of testing the solution. The developed solutions are measured against the needs of local user groups within their daily lives. This contributes to the ecological validity of the solution (Shadish et al., 2002).

The fourth and last core element of living labs is that intended users and beneficiaries are closely involved as "co-creators" of the design. They are considered to have specialised knowledge from a user perspective. Given their involvement from the onset of the innovation process, their experiences and preferences become part of the product or service that is being designed. This is also referred to as "user-driven" innovation (De Moor et al., 2010).

U-RLP as a living lab

The aims and setting of the U-RLP uniquely fit with these core characteristics of the living lab. First, the project had innovation as an explicit goal and, therefore, the project plan specified only basic requirements for the concept. The concept was framed around two pillars: the "co-housing" and "co-learning" of asylum seekers with local residents from the neighbourhood of Overvecht, Utrecht. This means that 38 local young adults were selected to live in a building adjacent to the ASC, managed by Socius, a housing company that sought to foster a sense of community. The building had shared facilities including a kitchen, a

common living room, classrooms (referred to as the "incubator space") and an outside terrace. The young tenants were responsible for the interior design of the project spaces, as well as self-management of the housing unit. They were also tasked with facilitating a wide range of social activities for locals from the Overvecht neighbourhood and asylum seekers alike. The People's University, Utrecht University Centre for Entrepreneurship and the Social Impact Factory delivered courses in business English and entrepreneurship, as well as a follow-up business coaching and incubation scheme for both groups. Beyond these basic characteristics that were set out in the project plan, the U-RLP had yet to take shape. There was budget and opportunity for the local young people to develop additional activities that would support asylum seekers' integration and well-being.

The "testbed" of the U-RLP was a new ASC that was situated in the neighbourhood of Overvecht, Utrecht. This provided the physical setting where new policy solutions were being developed and tested with those involved. The U-RLP was home to asylum seekers and local young people for up to 22 months. During this period, locals from the neighbourhood could also participate; some did so incidentally in one-off social events, while others participated in the full eight-week classes or even took multiple classes subsequently. As researchers, we monitored which activities were organised and their attendance, and collected data on the experiences of different groups with the project. We used multiple research methods to learn about their experiences. These include quantitative methods (monitoring their participation and surveys), as well as qualitative methods (interviewing and observation).

Understanding the perspectives of the different groups of participants was central to our evaluation of the policy interventions: from asylum seekers to the local young adults living at the centre, as well as locals from the neighbourhood. This was undertaken with a reflexive sensibility, as we were keen to undertake the project alongside others but also mindful of the power dynamics of the research endeavour and the partial nature of our research, as influenced by our own subjective positions (Okely, 1992; Jacobs Huey, 2002). As the project developed, we also supervised younger researchers conducting their master's studies on the subject, including Raneem Salama, a former Syrian refugee, who worked with those from Syria, which comprised the largest share of ASC residents, and Margot Bandringa, who worked with the young tenants. This enabled different perspectives to be elicited within the project from a position of more affinity between researched and researcher. However, the limitations of time and the

quick turnaround of people through the centre (with the average length of stay being around four months) meant that opportunities for building up a more participatory approach among the participants from other countries, such as Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Ethiopia, were limited and power imbalances between the researchers and research subjects remained in producing research outcomes.

We were no distant evaluators but both part of the "steering group" of the U-RLP and visible and approachable to participants in the living lab. This positioned us as partners in the project who were equally committed to the process of innovation and learning. We attended bi-monthly steering group meetings, sub-meetings with some of the partners and meetings with the projects' academic advisory group and the European funding agency, and held our own one-to-one discussions with partners. Our involvement in the day-to-day activities in the living lab as well as the day-to-day management of the project gave us a rich insight into the innovation process. We were able to study the lived experiences of different participants and also monitor changes in their experience after iterations in the development of the concept. This information was fed back to the project management and participants during these meetings, as well as in an interim report. Based on our intermediate feedback, some interventions within the project were changed along the way. This enabled a cycle of design and re-design that is characteristic of a living lab. Feeding back into the project at intermediate moments instead of only after the ending of the project enabled better use of evaluation results and learning during the project (cf. Contandriopoulos & Brousselle, 2012).

Co-creation of asylum reception

Asylum seekers and locals involved in the U-RLP developed several activities and concepts that contributed to the better integration and well-being of asylum seekers in the ASC. Some were incidental activities, developed from the outset of the project, such as cooking dinner together, game nights and a water pistol fight on a hot summer day. Others were more structural changes or repeated activities of which the design was improved over the course of the project. Here we outline two of these examples: (1) the co-creation of a professional course; and (2) the re-design of the main common space into a "world café". In these two examples, we reflect on how the shift from top-down policy implementation to

co-creation was made over the course of the project, how better solutions were developed and how the solutions impacted different user groups (asylum seekers and locals). These two examples were chosen because they are clear illustrations of what the living lab methodology entails, while they provide insight into how this approach empowered different user groups.

Innovation 1: co-creation of a professional computer training course
The initial course offering of the U-RLP consisted of courses in business English, offered by the People's University (Volksuniversiteit) of Utrecht and courses in entrepreneurship, offered by Utrecht University's Centre for Entrepreneurship. In the courses, a traditional format for delivery was adopted, in which teachers from the institutes were the experts who designed and taught the classes, and refugees and locals were the students taking part in the courses. There was a clear differentiation between teachers' and students' roles, and aspects of co-creation were, at this stage, largely absent.

Although the courses were greatly appreciated, this model was holding back some of the high-skilled participants. In the interim report, we reported that courses were, for some highly skilled ASC residents, "experienced as too basic and slow-paced, particularly in entrepreneurship classes when translation was occurring between English–Arabic and the other way around" (Oliver et al., 2018, p. 36). It reported on several highly educated young individuals who felt that the speed of the classes was too slow (Oliver et al., 2018). We advised the project managers to facilitate some of these asylum seekers to co-create elements of the course programme and activities, enabling reciprocity to be built into encounters. This would also make active use of their skills and knowledge, offer further opportunities for networking and help them build an appropriate CV (Oliver et al., 2018, p. 52).

The institutes offering the courses responded to the different skill levels of refugees and locals to some extent, albeit while retaining the traditional teacher–student model. The institutes enabled differentiation in ability in the classes offered in English, from basic to advanced level. They also arranged for the most able students to take the prestigious Cambridge English certificate, which would be a significant benefit for those seeking to enrol in higher education. In the entrepreneurship classes, mixed classes of locals and refugees were anticipated, but, in practice, the instructors found that the lack of English or Dutch language skills among the low-skilled refugees inhibited the learning process of the groups. Before our interim feedback on this issue, they had already trialled different

group compositions to find out what worked. These moved from (1) everyone in class together (with the assistance of interpreters) to (2) refugees and locals in separate classes and (3) highly skilled refugees and locals together, with low skilled refugees separately. The third arrangement was adopted as the best option.

Though the opportunities for greater reciprocity in the course offering were quite limited in the official course programme, an additional course in computer skills was designed bottom up by two of the refugees, who then took on a teaching role. Habib was educated as a professional IT consultant at the Netherlands at the University of Maastricht; due to the war in Yemen, he and his family could not return to their country of origin and applied for asylum in the Netherlands. Habib and his friend Adair, who was in a similar situation, could not find jobs in the Netherlands despite their Dutch university education and English proficiency. Through Incluusion, a Utrecht University programme for refugees who cooperated with the U-RLP, Habib took additional university courses in management. Together with some Dutch students, he developed the idea of teaching basic computer courses to asylum seekers within the U-RLP together with some Dutch students. This worked well and the course was repeated within the U-RLP several times.

This example indicates that some asylum seekers and refugees are able to actively participate as co-creators, albeit as volunteers rather than salaried teachers as in the cases of the other courses, and dependent on the project management for allowing them to do so. Habib and Adair had the opportunity to initiate and implement a computer skills course, which enabled them to employ their professional IT skills and contributed to their labour market integration. Initially, they created a start-up teaching computer courses and applied for funding from the city authorities (Department of Work and Income), although it proved difficult to convince them of the feasibility of their idea. After about a year, Habib got a job with an international firm. This job was below his educational level but it gave him a chance to begin a professional career and he was determined to make the very best of it, in order to move on to a job at his professional level in the future.

Co-creating the courses also contributed to the well-being of Habib and Adair during their time in the ASC. They felt taken seriously as professionals, which had positive effects on their self-esteem and outlook on their futures. When teaching the computer course, Habib wore a formal suit and tie, indicating that he explicitly saw this as a professional role (participant observation, 23 February 2018). Habib and Adair's unique skills were, they felt, being recognised since they

were contributing in a way that not just anybody could (such as volunteering in events or cleaning). Teaching was also an activity that Habib and his colleague perceived as being an asset to their CVs, which helped them to have confidence in their futures in the Netherlands.

The example of Habib and Adair shows how it was difficult to establish changes within the pre-set course programme with co-creative practices. However, by offering an additional element instead, the two refugees succeeded in setting up a different course where their roles in the teacher–student model were shifted and they could contribute to the programme on a reciprocal basis. This led to the empowerment of the two refugees whom it concerned; they felt that their skills and competencies were acknowledged, which contributed to their self-esteem and well-being. The refugees also included the organisation of the computer skills course on their CVs and used this as a means of entering the labour market— although this did not immediately work out.

In this case, we see that the co-creative method of the living lab led to the empowerment of users. Ownership of the course contributed to the two young men's well-being and was a stepping-stone to labour market integration. However, here, they still ran into problems; for example, in gaining funding and getting a job at a level commensurate with their educational qualifications. Moreover, we saw that in their roles as teachers, Habib and Adair were not equal to the other course teachers as they did not get paid, nor did they have a contract of employment, whereas other teachers from the university institutes did. In this respect, Habib and Adair were instead more equal to the young Dutch people who volunteered for the project.

Innovation 2: co-ownership of the common space of the ASC

The "incubator space" of the U-RLP was conceived of by the project management as a common space to be used by the asylum seekers, the young Dutch people living in the building and locals from the neighbourhood. The space included a kitchen, sofas, tables and chairs for study and socialising, and a set of classrooms. However, early in the project, the space was perceived by asylum seekers and the local young adults as being owned by the project managers since once the ASC was fully open, there were limitations on access to the space. Socius, the housing corporation, was responsible for managing the space, and its primary concern was with the security of the building to safeguard the young adults living there. As a result, the incubator space was open only at limited times when classes or activities were taking place. This inhibited social integration and

mutual encounters between locals, asylum seekers and young people. The young people, who still lived in the building, met more often among themselves in their shared living room and kitchens upstairs, while the asylum seekers met among themselves around the laundry room and in the hallways, in a large room which was available to them one evening a week, as well as outside the building. Only the outdoor space was available for unlimited encounters between these groups.

The issue of co-ownership of the space was raised by us as researchers with the project managers and was also a lively source of discussion among the partners. Discussion about extending the opening hours of the incubator space went on for several months as a result of stakeholders bringing different arguments to the table. A decision was reached to recruit paid hosts to open the space during office hours, and after some time to arrange this, hosts were recruited and hired from the neighbourhood to serve coffee and tea and oversee the space. One of the project managers was particularly keen that the host help prevent unwanted young people from entering, especially since for some time at the beginning of the project, they had experienced difficulties with young men coming for the free Wi-Fi rather than the project, leaving some of the girls feeling uncomfortable entering and leaving their homes. Hiring a local host was preferred to the suggestion of recruiting some of the asylum seekers to do the job. One of the managers in the partnership explained that "asylum seekers […] would be in no position to act legitimately and control the situation if something would go wrong, like if conflicts would arise, or if people would take something away from this place".

Elham, an asylum seeker from another ASC, who was considered for the job on a volunteer basis, agreed that it would be difficult to reprimand other asylum seekers. However, positioning only Dutch locals as legitimate "hosts" within this project had the consequence of implicitly rendering asylum seekers as "guests", echoing similar findings on citizens' initiatives for refugees reported by Darling (2011) and by Rast and Ghorashi (2018). This indicates that such a disbalance in power relations is not exceptional.

In the final year of the project, asylum seekers, young adults and some locals from the neighbourhood took the initiative to engage in a six-week project of redesigning the incubator space. The initiative was developed as a "challenge" by the partner organisation, which provided professional coaching and networking for asylum seekers, aimed at helping participants explore possibilities for starting their own businesses. It was led by the organisation's relatively young representative, a woman just a few years older than most of the young adults

living at the project and most of the young refugees, who was in her first job. The project management team was initially unsure about taking forward this initiative because the space had already been designed as the project began and, in their view, functioned according to plan. The eagerness of the mixed group of initiators to take on this new project, however, and their ideas for developing the communal space were convincing.

During the enterprise, the participants were given the freedom to re-design the incubator space, under the condition that they would not change the structure ("no tearing down of walls") and that it would not cost more than a few hundred euros. Refugees, locals and young adults living in the building worked on the project for several weeks, mostly during weekends. The project ended with an official, festive launch, attended by officials including the city's deputy mayor. The incubator space was re-named "Einstein's Coffee of the World", with its own logo. Instead of the paid hosts, asylum seekers and locals together served coffee blends from Yemen, Ethiopia, Syria and many other countries. The common space was designed to be cosy and inviting, more like a living room as preferred by the refugees and tenants. This contrasted with the previous incarnation, which had an atmosphere more like that of an office space. As a result, all groups experienced greater ownership over the space. Ultimately, the project managers were also happy with the end result and actively promoted the participants' achievements in creating an inclusive place. One of the project managers gave an enthusiastic speech during the official opening.

In this example, as in the previous case of the educational courses, the traditional power relations in the living lab were not fundamentally disrupted. The asylum seekers and locals remained guests in the space and the Dutch hired professionals were the hosts. However, just as in the first example of the co-creation of the computer skills course, here, the participants (asylum seekers and locals alike) developed a new opportunity within the project's flexible business incubation programme as an alternative way of gaining ownership over the space by redesigning it and adapting the purposes that it served. In April and May 2018, asylum seekers and locals served coffee, tea, mint water and biscuits to visitors of the ASC, free of charge. This altered the atmosphere of the space and some of the young tenants felt empowered by the initial success of the project. Femke, a tenant in her early twenties explained:

> I thought that [the challenge] was great: Einstein's Coffee of the World [...] Here you noticed everybody had grown towards each other and made

something happen together. And that went... that was such a success, also with the opening. There were so many people! I really was... that really surprised me.

The asylum seekers also experienced a more relaxed atmosphere in the space and greater freedom to employ activities than in other ASCs where asylum seekers had very limited ownership over territory (see also O'Reilly, 2020). Salman, an Iranian man in his twenties said:

When I was there, it was really great. It was always a friendly environment and I considered everybody kind of being a friend. There was a great vibe. Great atmosphere [...] It was a really nice place to hang out. Around there, it was pretty much the only place to hang out. There's also some crappy places like the laundry room or something in the camp, but that's not such a nice place, with the noise and people passing by all the time. And it's kind of dirty. So, it was like a little coffee shop or something, around Einstein. Sometimes we would go there and get some coffee, and sometimes just go to... use the Wi-Fi, chill out.

However, the pleasant co-ownership of the space was short-lived, as the project came to an abrupt end in the late summer of 2018. This occurred when COA, the national agency responsible for the accommodation of asylum seekers, suddenly relocated all the asylum seekers living at the ASC. Their departure came sooner than expected, and there was only limited and last-minute communication of the intent to move ASC residents. This negatively affected the morale of those involved in Plan Einstein. A young Iranian refugee, Leilani, involved in redesigning the coffee space explained that "it felt like this is for nothing, we did everything for nothing".

Discussion and conclusions

The living lab methodology entails the design and redesign of new solutions by the intended user groups in the context where the solutions will be implemented. In the case of the U-RLP, asylum seekers and locals co-created a new concept of asylum reception within the setting of an ASC in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands. The project had innovation as an explicit goal and aimed to

overcome problems in asylum reception, including the poor well-being of asylum seekers during their time in the ASC and slow social and economic integration after they move out.

As researchers, we implemented the living lab methodology by providing intermediate feedback to the project managers and participants based on the "user experiences" we took from our research. Two main characteristics of the project were predefined by the project partners, who worked collaboratively to design the project. These were the physical design of the building where the asylum seekers and local young adults lived (co-housing) and joint courses for asylum seekers and locals offered by knowledge institutes in the partnership (co-learning). Indicators for achieving success were, however, formulated loosely, as the project managers aimed for the project to play out and develop itself from the bottom up. As researchers, we were committed to the innovation process and paid attention to additional, unexpected results beyond the pre-determined goals.

The two examples discussed in this chapter show how co-creative practices in the living lab emerged. This was a valuable asset in the project. Asylum seekers and locals reported increased feelings of reciprocity, equality and being valued, especially during those moments of co-creation. Besides improved well-being, there were nascent indications of longer-term effects for the integration of refugees, especially of social integration between locals and refugees, and refugees taking the first steps towards the labour market—as the case of Habib and Adair shows. In these instances, the living lab approach, where solutions were co-created rather than provided, led to the empowerment of users: the asylum seekers and local young adults participating in the U-RLP.

Several contextual aspects, however, held back the emergence of co-creative practices in this living lab, which inhibited the empowerment of locals and asylum seekers. These contextual factors were partly related to the internal dynamics of the project and partly related to external national reception policy. First, for the project managers, who had high stakes in the project, it was difficult to diverge from the initial concept of the project consisting of co-housing and co-learning. The initial idea of the U-RLP was developed collaboratively, but, without user involvement, it remained somewhat top down. It was also difficult for partners to diverge from allocated budgets and responsibilities, despite some inbuilt flexibility in the project's funding structure. In the case of the co-creation of educational courses, the existing programme to some extent responded to the challenge of the participants' different levels that organisers encountered:

the classes were split up to offer courses at different levels to different groups. However, it was through the additional computer skills course that refugees participating in the project were able to break more radically with the model of classes. At this point, they became more empowered by taking on the role of teachers themselves within their particular field of expertise. In the case of the re-design of the common living space of the ASC, the needs of the different user groups to benefit from the space were affected by a long period of both decision-making and recruiting a host to manage the space. Ownership through the re-design of the space into a café offered an opportunity to tip the balance but was still subject to a limited budget and conditions (including no structural changes to the building).

These examples show how, in this context of asylum reception, the project managers retained a leading role. The reasons were understandable; ultimately the housing corporation was responsible for the safety of the local young adults who were living in their buildings and were answerable to the project funder regarding what had been achieved. However, this meant there were fewer opportunities than there might have been for the participants to initiate and engage in innovative, co-creative practices, which could have enhanced their empowerment and, thus, the emergence of solutions. Although the tenants had a key role in self-organising their space, locals, as well as primarily asylum seekers, remained in a guest role for much of the project, rather than being equal co-owners of the concept, potentially inhibiting their empowerment. Hence, one of the evaluation's final recommendations for future initiatives like this is to develop further opportunities to co-design, co-teach or co-organise spaces, activities and courses.

As a second feature related to the internal dynamics of the project, we also observed that among the different participant groups—locals from the neighbourhood, young adults living adjacent to the ASC, and asylum seekers and refugees—different levels of agency remained. These differences were most prominent in the project between the young adults and asylum seekers living onsite. At the outset of the project, the young adults were implicitly assigned the role of initiators of activities, and they also had more resources to do so. It was, therefore, not surprising that they took on a leading role in re-designing the common space. This was done mostly by young tenants who performed formal (paid) tasks within the project. Ultimately, however, as the project developed, co-ownership and empowerment were experienced, to some extent, by asylum seekers as well. The case of Habib and Adair shows that when asylum seekers

were keen to take on an initiator role, they were dependent on help from more powerful actors in the project to realise this.

Third, a significant limitation of the living lab methodology leading to the empowerment of participants in the asylum reception context was the limited time frame of the project. Initially, there were significant delays in the arrival of asylum seekers, which had effects on momentum. Global political events, in the form of the EU-Turkey refugee deal in March 2016 and the closure of borders (in middle Europe, along the Mediterranean routes as well as possibly through adjustments in German hospitability), contributed to a reduction in the numbers of asylum applications all over Europe, as well as in the Netherlands. There were also delays in completing the building work on the ASC side of the building, which meant it could not be fully opened. These factors meant that initially, only 40 young, male asylum seekers, all single and with a good level of spoken English, were housed at the centre. This had positive consequences for the co-creative practices of both groups, with both local tenants and ASC residents spontaneously joining in activities. However, national asylum policy dictated that the building needed to house around 400 asylum seekers. Therefore, more in line with the original plans, 342 asylum seekers arrived in August 2017, a majority being adults. This shift in scale also negatively affected the realisation of, and potential for, co-creative practices (see Oliver et al., 2020).

A fourth contextual aspect that hindered the emergence of co-creative practices in this living lab was also time related. Two factors are important here. First, there was a great deal of transience in the ASC population, with over 900 people moving through in a little over a year, and most individuals only staying for around four months. This inhibited the necessary time it would take for people to become acquainted with the project, get to know key personnel and feel able to contribute. It meant that those who might have been interested in developing solutions in a participatory manner did not really have time to mobilise themselves and others before moving on. Second, despite the delay in the arrival of the asylum seeker population, the project's end date was fixed. The deputy mayor had made a political commitment to the neighbourhood that the project would shut after two years, at the end of October 2018. It was felt important not to renege on this commitment, so even as the project was starting in earnest in August 2017, it already faced the spectre of imminent closure. Even so, as we noted above, the duration was shortened even further as the ASC was closed earlier than expected. The sudden closure of the U-RLP was disappointing

for many people invested in the project—including those who participated in re-designing the common living space.

What does this teach us about the value of co-creative methodologies such as the living lab in the specific context of asylum reception? First, that applying such a methodology is possible and can lead to the empowerment of participants, even when they have little agency. All asylum seeker participants felt that they were using their time more productively, in contrast to the feelings of boredom and depression they had experienced in other ASCs. They also valued the skills they had learned, mostly focusing on a future in the Netherlands or Europe. Locals from the neighbourhood and the young adults in the project were often motivated to "do something" for refugees: a perspective that implicitly positioned them as givers and refugees the receivers (cf. Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). In the day-to-day practice of courses and activities, we saw that this power imbalance sometimes shifted as locals learned from refugees too.

However, in the contexts of asylum reception, inbuilt power imbalances are difficult to break through. Project managers have formal roles and responsibilities: for example, in the case of the partner responsible for the security of the young adults living adjacent to the centre. This affected opportunities for innovation to emerge bottom up. As a result, we see that most innovation happened alongside the initial concept, and although the project managers were open to this happening, they were not always able to actively stimulate it. The structural inequalities between the different participant groups remained and also had implications for the project. The young tenants were able to join in or leave the project as they pleased, had nice living conditions and autonomy over their day-to-day lives. The asylum seekers, on the other hand, were allocated to a certain ASC, shared rooms with strangers, were forced to move between different centres and had limited legal security while waiting for a decision on their application. As a result, locals in the living lab had more agency over whether and how to become involved in the project than ASC residents who were dependent on housing at the ASC (and see also Oliver et al., 2020).

This leads us to conclude that co-creative methodologies such as the living lab can lead to empowerment and bottom-up innovation for asylum reception, but there needs to be more explicit attention to differences in power and agency between different participant groups, between participants and project managers, and finally between participants and project evaluators. The conditions within which the project worked, identified above, were suboptimal for the emergence of innovation through co-creative practices. Nevertheless, even here, we

encountered several promising examples of new solutions to problems in asylum reception being developed as the project proceeded. Participants were, to some extent, able to shape the public and academic narrative around the project, but power imbalances remained. Because of the legitimacy of the solutions crafted by the asylum seekers and locals themselves, we saw that they were sometimes able to break through practical and political deadlocks evident in asylum policymaking, albeit on a small scale.

References

Adviescommissie Vreemdelingenzaken (ACVZ: Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs). (2013). *Verloren tijd: Advies over dagbesteding in de opvang voor vreemdelingen (Lost time: Advisory report on activities in reception facilities for aliens).* Den Haag: ACVZ.

Adviescommissie voor Vreemdelingenzaken (ACVZ: Advisory Committee on Migration Affairs). (2017). *Pieken en dalen: Naar een duurzaam systeem voor opvang van asielzoekers en huisvesting en integratie van vergunninghouders. (Highs and lows: towards a sustainable system for the reception of asylum seekers and the housing and integration of permit holders).* Den Haag: ACVZ.

Almirall, E., & J. Wareham. (2011). Living Labs: Arbiters of Mid- and Ground-level Innovation. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 23:87–102.

Bakker, L., Dagevos, J., & G. Engbersen. (2017). Explaining the Refugee Gap: A Longitudinal Study on Labor Market Participation of Refugees in the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(11):1775–1791.

Bason, C. (2010). *Leading Public Sector Innovation: Co-creating for a Better Society.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Bergvall-Kåreborn, B., & A. Ståhlbröst. (2009). Living Lab: An Open and Citizen-Centric Approach for Innovation. *International Journal of Innovation and Regional Development*, 1(4):356–370.

Carstensen, H. V., & C. Bason. (2012). Powering Collaborative Policy Innovation: Can Innovation Labs Help? *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 17(1):1–26.

Connor, P. (2010). Explaining the Refugee Gap: Economic Outcomes of Refugees Versus Other Immigrants. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(3):377–397.

Contandriopoulos, D., & A. Brousselle. (2012). Evaluation Models and Evaluation Use. *Evaluation*, 18(1):61–77.

Darling, J. (2009). Becoming Bare Life: Asylum, Hospitality, and the Politics of Encampment. *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 27:649–665.

Darling, J. (2011). Giving Space: Care, Generosity and Belonging in a UK Asylum Drop-in Centre. *Geoforum*, 42(4):408–417.

Dekker, R., Franco Contreras, J., & A. Meijer. (2019). The Living Lab as a Methodology for Public Administration Research: A Systematic Literature Review of its Applications in the Social Sciences. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(14):1207–1217.

De Moor, K., Berte, K., de Marez, L., Joseph, W., Deryckere, T., & L. Martens. (2010). User-driven Innovation? Challenges of User Involvement in Future Technology Analysis. *Science and Public Policy*, 37(1):51–61.

Engbersen, G., Jennissen, R., & M. Bokhorst. (2015), Geen Tijd te Verliezen: Van Opvang naar Integratie van Asielmigranten. (No Time to Lose: From Reception to Integration of Asylum Migrants). *WRR Policy Brief no. 4.* Den Haag: WRR.

Følstad, A. (2008). Towards a Living Lab for the Development of Online Community Services. *Electronic Journal of Networking and Virtual Organizations*, 10:47–58.

Geuijen, K. (1998). Wonen en werken in een asielzoekerscentrum. *Migrantenstudies*, 14(4):261–272.

Geuijen, K. (2003). Constraints and Constructions of Meaning in an Asylum Seekers Residence Centre. In W. Van Beek, M. Fumerton & W. Pantsters (eds.). *Meeting Culture: Essays in Honour of Arie de Ruijter*. Maastricht: Shaker, pp. 323–337.

Ghorashi, H. (2005). Refugees: Agents of Change or Passive Victims: The Impact of Welfare States (the Case of the Netherlands) on Refugees. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18(2):182–198.

Hartley, J. (2005). Innovation in Governance and Public Services: Past and Present. *Public Money and Management*, 25(1):27–34.

Hooli, L., Jauhiainen J. S., & K. Lähde. (2016). Living Labs and Knowledge Creation in Developing Countries: Living Labs as a Tool for Socio-economic Resilience in Tanzania. *African Journal of Science, Technology, Innovation and Development*, 8(1):61–70.

Jacobs-Huey, L. (2002). The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability Among "Native" Anthropologists. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3):791–804.

Kreichauf, R. (2018). From Forced Migration to Forced Arrival: The Campization of Refugee Accommodation in European Cities. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6(7).

Martin, I., Arcarons, A., Aumüller, J., Bevelander, P., Emilsson, H., Kalantaryan, S., MacIver, A., Mara, I., Scalettaris, G., Venturini, A., Vidovic, H., van der Welle, I., Windisch, M., Wolffberg, R., & A. Zorlu. (2016). *From Refugees to Workers: Mapping Labor Market Integration Support Measures for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in EU Member States. Volume II: Literature Review and Country Case Studies.* Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Odé, A., & J. Dagevos. (2017). Statushouders aan het werk (Permit Holders at Work). *Mens en Maatschappij*, 92(4):447–468.

Okely, J. (1992). Anthropology and Autobiography: Participatory Experience and Embodied Knowledge. In H. Callaway & J. Okely (eds.). *Anthropology and Autobiography*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–28.

Oliver, C., Dekker, R., & K. Geuijen. (2018). *The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad Evaluation Interim Report*. COMPAS, Oxford University.

Oliver, C., Dekker, R., & K. Geuijen. (2019). *The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad Final Evaluation Report*. COMPAS, Oxford University.

Oliver, C., Geuijen, K., & R. Dekker. (2020). Social Contact and Encounter in Asylum Seeker Reception: The Utrecht Refugee Launchpad. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 8(27).

O'Reilly, Z. (2019). *The In-between Spaces of Asylum and Migration: A Participatory Visual Approach*. Springer International Publishing.

Rast, M. C., & H. Ghorashi. (2018). Dancing with 'The Other': Challenges and Opportunities of Deepening Democracy Through Participatory Spaces for Refugees. *Social Inclusion*, 6(1):188–198.

Rittel, H. W. J., & M. M. Webber. (1973). Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4:155–169.

Schans, D., & C. Optekamp. (2016). *Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior? Combatting Irregular Migration Through Information Campaigns*. Den Haag: WODC.

Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & D. T. Campbell. (2002). *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Van den Enden, T., De Winter-Koçak, S., Booijink, M., & M. De Gruijter. (2018). *Wat Werkt bij de Bevordering van Arbeidsparticipatie van Statushouders. (What Works in Enhancing Permit Holders' Labour Market Participation)*. Utrecht: Movisie.

Voorberg, W. H., Bekkers, V. J., & L. G. Tummers. (2015). A Systematic Review of Co-creation and Co-production: Embarking on the Social Innovation Journey. *Public Management Review*, 17(9):1333–1357.